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# Learning through social spaces: migrant women and lifelong learning in post-colonial London

## Abstract

This article shows how migrant women engage in learning through social spaces. It argues that such spaces are little recognised, and that there are multiple ways in which migrant women construct and negotiate their informal learning through socializing with other women in different informal modes. Additionally, the article shows how learning is shaped by the socio-political, geographical and multicultural context of living in London, outlining ways in which gendered and racialised identities shape, construct and constrain participation in lifelong learning.

The article shows that one way in which migrant women resist (post)colonial constructions of difference is by engaging in informal and non-formal lifelong learning, arguing that the benefits are (at least) two-fold. The women develop skills (including language skills) but also use their informal learning to develop what is referred to in this article as relational capital. The article concludes that informal lifelong learning develop through social spaces can enhance a sense of belonging for migrant women.

## Introduction

Lifelong learning, a catch-phrase of modern governments, is not a new concept, although it has been differently named across a century, including as recurrent (Kallen and Bengtsson, 1973; Istance et al, 2002), popular (Crowther et al 2005) adult (Wilson and Hayes, 2000), continuing (Jarvis, 1983), liberal (Van Doren, 1943) and lifelong education (Yeaxlee, 1929). Whatever the term, the concept includes learning across the lifespan (Field and Leicester, 2000) although more often than not current government policy, in the UK and elsewhere, has focussed on learning across the *working* lifespan (Burke and Jackson, 2004). Whilst lifelong learning includes formal as well as informal and non-formal learning, this article is particularly interested in the informal and non-formal learning which is undertaken by the migrant women with which this research is concerned.

Although boundaries between informal and non-formal (and indeed formal) learning are fluid and can only be meaningfully drawn in relation to particular contexts and for particular purposes (Colley et al 2002), I am taking informal learning to be the unstructured learning which most of us do on a daily basis. It arises from our encounters with others as well as with the cultural artefacts of our daily lives. Non-formal learning includes non-accredited learning which is nevertheless structured and intentional, and often takes place in more formal contexts, such as adult learning centres, or workplaces. This article shows how migrant women engage in non-formal and informal learning through social spaces, arguing that although social spaces are little recognised as sites of learning there are multiple ways in which migrant women construct and negotiate their informal learning through their experiences of socializing with other women in different informal modes and semi-formal associations.

In addition, the article shows how learning is also shaped by the socio-political, geographical and post-colonial context of living in London. In considering *post-colonial* London, it is not arguing that colonialism no longer has relevance. On the contrary, the histories and experiences of colonialism continue to impact on the

(previously) colonised and the (previous) colonisers. Whilst 'post' can suggest something which supercedes, or comes after, the prefix 'post' can also be used to indicate a process of ongoing transformation or change (see eg Venn, 2006), central to theorisations not just of post-colonialism as well as post-structuralism and feminism (see eg Brooks, 1997, for discussion of post-feminism). In considering the post-colonial, Couze Venn suggests that:

The post-colonial can be understood as a virtual space, that is, a space of possibility and emergence. It is thus also potential becoming: it opens towards a future that will not repeat existing forms of sociality and oppressive power relations (Venn, 2006: 190).

In considering migrant women's lifelong learning, I am interested in spaces of possibility. Nevertheless, the post-colonial belongs to the virtual and discursive spaces and collective memories of the colonizers as well as the colonised. As McLintock (1995) argues, "imperialism ... is not something that happened elsewhere – a disagreeable fact of history external to Western identity (McLintock, 1995: 5). Both colonialism and imperialism construct 'difference' and therefore identity (Brah, 2007) although this is not always recognised nor problematised.

The article develops understandings of ways in which intersected gendered, sexualised, racialised, ethnicised and diasporic identifications construct and constrain participation in lifelong learning. It argues that whilst identities are formed in part through individual agency, they are also constructed and constrained by gendered, racialised and sexualised social divisions. The article shows that one way in which migrant women resist post-colonial constructions of difference is by engaging in informal and non-formal learning, arguing that the benefits are (at least) two-fold. The women develop skills (including language skills) but also use their informal and non-formal learning to develop what is referred to in this article as relational capital. The article concludes that learning developed through social spaces can enhance a sense of belonging for migrant women.

### The research

The findings discussed in this article come from a larger research project conducted for the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK<sup>ii</sup> which explored women's social spaces in post-colonial London. The project examined the ways in which women perform social identifications in private and public social spaces in London. Its aims were to:

- explore commonalities and differences in the ways in which women construct their gendered and sexualised, racialised and ethnicised, identities within social spaces in post-colonial London;
- examine the ways in which women perform social identifications in private and public social spaces in London; and
- develop theoretical understandings of post-colonial intersected identities in urban social spaces in London.

It was developed through 42 in-depth interviews with 'white' and 'South Asian', 'straight' and 'queer' women in the different urban cultural spaces of some of the localities of London. Extensive contacts with diverse community groups were undertaken in order to locate particular groups with which the project could work. Local government websites were used to identify community projects and groups and extensive contacts were made with diverse community groups. Subsequently, the

groups were visited on their premises and permission was sought to include them in the research sample. Groups selected were:

- an informal network for (mainly) young Asian women identifying as lesbian or bisexual;
- two older Asian women's groups that meet under the aegis of local authorities
- three mixed-ethnic reading groups – one run by a local library and the other two through informal networks
- three mixed-ethnic groups who meet socially to knit, one of which is specifically for 'queer' women.

Prior to conducting the interviews, a team of three researchers spent some time as participant observers within the selected social groups, a key methodological aspect of work grounded in feminist research. A second team began the analysis by reading all of the interview transcripts, and discussing the key themes which were emerging. It became apparent that post-colonial London was a key theme on which to focus analysis. Other key themes which emerged included, for example, 'locality', 'identity', 'friendship' and 'multiculturalism'.

Each theme was further coded and analysed through the sub-themes which were revealed. For example, 'identity' was further analysed through several sub-themes, such as 'belonging', 'diaspora', 'religion', 'sexuality', 'whiteness' and 'national identity'. Analysis was undertaken by the new team using Nvivo software for examining qualitative data. Nvivo provided an efficient way of managing data derived from loosely structured interviews, with the process allowing a methodical sifting and selecting of data which reinforced the theoretical debate. Names are coded throughout and ethnicities and sexualities (where stated) are self-identified.<sup>iii</sup>

### London: a city of migrants?

Women constitute around one half of the world's international migrant population, and international migration is one of the most challenging global policy issues of the twenty-first century. Although global migration is not new, the scale of it is. As a report by the UK's Home Office (2005) shows, around 175 million people worldwide live outside their country of birth, and almost 10% of people living in the developed world are migrants, of whom around 45% are women (European Women's Lobby, 2007). Women in diverse geographical contexts and at different historical moments have been involved in various forms of migration, and understanding gender relations is key to the development of migration policies and theoretical concerns on issues such as employment, household organisation, identity, citizenship and transnationalism (Willis and Yeoh, 2000). However, despite the global as well as national significance of migration, there is still a lamentable lack of gender analysis in most of the policy debates (Schiff et al, 2007), and theory, policy and practice that link gender equality concerns with migration are rare (Jolly and Reeves, 2005). Discussions of migrants are often gender neutral, with experiences normally debated in relation to men's lives and employment, with nuances or analyses of gender and its intersections seriously lacking in European policy (European Women's Lobby, 2007).

UNESCO defines migrants as those who move from one region or place to another. The term migrant can be understood as "any person who lives temporarily or permanently in a country where he or she was not born, and has acquired some significant social ties to this country" although a person can also be considered a migrant even when s/he is born in the country they inhabit (European Women's

Lobby). Although the majority of women interviewed whom I discuss in this article were not born in the UK, some were, and I shall be taking the broader UNESCO definition of migrants to include here women who were born in or partially identify with a country of generational origin or diasporan identification (see below). I do this through their self-definitions of ethnicity (eg British Asian, Asian British, East African Asian etc) and their often complex constructions of cultural identities (Bhachu, 1996; Buijs, 1996), reflected through colonial pasts and post-colonial presents.

London, the site of this research, has been described as the post-colonial city *par excellence* (Cox and Narayan, 2008). It should be understood through its histories and peoples as well as through its current economic and political climate. Its 8 million plus inhabitants speak over 300 languages and there are at least 50 ethnic/national communities with over 10,000 members (Cox and Narayan, 2008). London has the highest proportion of foreign-born people per head of population in the UK (Home Office, 2005), and there is a foreign born population somewhere in the region of two million currently living in London (Gordon et al, 2007: 3). Once in the UK, migrants tend to be more heavily concentrated in London than elsewhere: more than 40% migrants to the UK live in London, making up 26% of London's population. Migrants come from a wide range of both developed and under-developed countries, with recent migration from Eastern Europe seeing large growth. This follows earlier patterns of immigration to London in the 1960s and 1970s from primarily Commonwealth countries, and Jewish and Irish immigration at the turn of the century.

As a force of global power and a major port, London has long been a city of migrants, filled with tensions and complexities, as this interviewee shows:

*London [...] it's an amazing, it's just an amazing city. A city with such hard history to swallow and such a mix [...]. You forget that the city you live in is also this city that has had and still has this incredible kind of global significance in all sorts of ways. I have a really palpable sense of that and a really palpable sense of the history and that this is this city that's been kind of growing since Viking invasions, mmm, really, and exclusively through migration. This is a city of migrants and a city that kind of oppressed large sections of the world and a city that you know just so amazing and I really, the sense of history I think and that connection to history that's sometimes quite painful is a really big part of what makes me feel English and certainly what makes me feel comfortable in London (KQKG8, White British, lesbian, 30s).*

However, whilst this respondent recognises the 'hard history' of oppression and pain, she still feels 'comfortable in London'. London's (and England's) colonial past is also what makes it 'great' for her, and she seems to identify with the colonizers ('we're who showed up'):

*But I do like London because London, London is, is quintessentially English in the sense that we're who showed up. There's something great about that (KQKG8, White British, lesbian, 30s).*

Nevertheless, living London (Cox et al, 2009 forthcoming) is not necessarily 'great' for all (Bellis and Morrice, 2003) and some migrant women clearly experience isolation, both from people and from access to goods and services. The respondent below, who has lived in London for 42 years, still lives in a place of loneliness and isolation, a world far away from her "own country":

*There was no one from my community whom I could meet, that was the first thing – as a housewife, I mean once you're done with your chores, what are you supposed to do? Where it's all ...Europeans with their 'hello hi' formalities, they're hardly like people in our countries. It's not like in your own country where people ask how you are, if you need anything, so of course there will be isolation (BC01, British Asian, 60s).*

As she explains, it is difficult to see how feelings of separateness might be overcome, when real or apparent culture clashes make it appear impossible for different groups to “mix”. London is filled with past, present and future possibilities; with the local, national and global; with stories and histories and collective memories; with gendered, sexualised and racialised identities. Identifications and categorisations develop through the conditions and relations that evolve through colonial and post-colonial histories and discursive spaces (Jackson 2008), with multiple axes of difference arising from the impact of colonialism (see eg Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1996), including migration. As the extracts below demonstrate, these axes include gender (shopping, child care) and possibly socio-economic circumstances (including lack of transport and ability to travel):

*the area where I live, I faced a lot of problems because it is a largely residential area, so I had to travel far for groceries and shopping. .... Since now a lot more people have moved to the area, and the demand has increased, there are more things available, and my kids are also grown up now! (BC01, British Asian, 60s).*

Other axes of difference include ethnicity (“Asians”) and religion (“Muslims”):

*First of all, there's a clash between the people of both places – language, religion, the way we conduct our daily activities, our culture, everything of ours, i.e. of Asians, clashes with theirs, especially – I think – of Muslims, because we don't drink, there are a lot of things we don't do, restrictions, it's difficult to mix with them. Their compatibility of their concepts and communication is difficult, because what we consider wrong, they consider good, so there is a clash. How should we mix? (BC01, British Asian, 60s)*

As Avtar Brah has shown, the ‘problematic of identity’ (Brah, 2007: 136) continues to determine ways in which subjectivities and identities emerge and are submerged, and our sense of self is tied to our interactions with others through the everyday practices in which we locate ourselves (Venn, 2006:17). The intersections of gender, ‘race’, class and sexuality (Phoenix and Brah, 2004), coupled with the power relations of post-colonialism, signal ways in which meanings of such everyday practices are constructed through multiple layers. As the interviewees show, perceived (or actual) cultural clashes are constructed through the intersections of religious, classed, sexualised, racialised and gendered identities. As this research has shown, intersected identities are also constructed through discourses of ‘migrant’.

London is a major city of complex spaces. It is a post-structural world nevertheless made up of structures derived from social, historical, economic, political, ideological and cultural conditions and power relations (Jackson, 2008). It is through such conditions and relations that identities evolve. Stuart Hall (2000) conceptualises identity as a continual process of becoming through identifications:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional

sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modulations of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion .... Above all ... identities are constructed through, not outside, difference (Hall, 2000:17)

Identities are borne through discursive spaces, including those of colonialism, post-colonialism and empire and of the discursive and material spaces of migration and diasporic identifications. Whilst some of the women may not be first generation in the UK, they have a strong psychic and emotional connection to their generational memories of diaspora, developed through the stories and histories told to them of 'home'. However, whilst diaspora is about loss and exile, it is also about developing flexible and/or alternative ways of being (Rassool, 1997). Diaspora is about movement which is emotional and psychic and well as physical, as new belongings and identities in new spaces are negotiated and constructed. Our sense of self varies according to our histories, to shared experiences, and to identifications, and the meanings we attach to them. I am interested in exploring a diaspora embedded in the everyday through considerations of the past, present and future, through the tensions between old and new relationships and social networks, and through changing meanings of identity and community (Jackson and Kiwan, in preparation).

As this research shows, groups and individuals of unequal power and unequal access to resources and to dominant ways of being try to find liveable spaces, including through the social spaces in which I am interested in this article: women's social spaces in London. Mohanty (1992) has described a politics of location which is developed through the inter-relationship of social, cultural, political, historical and economic processes with personal biographies and collective stories or histories. The interviewees have shown how they belong in multiple locations simultaneously, with strong ties to localities in which they do not live because of ties of memory, including diasporan memories. The research identified ways in which social spaces enable women to negotiate and understand the multiplicity of diverse identities, including diasporan identities. In the next section, I explore ways in which informal and lifelong learning impacts onto such identity constructions, and in particular to examine ways in which learning takes place through social spaces.

#### Different spaces, different voices

Experiences of migration can provide new opportunities but can also entrench traditional roles (Jolly and Reeve, 2005). For some migrant women, the search for social spaces is located with communities which confirm their ethnicised, gendered and sexualised identities:

*I enjoy a lot at communities centres that we Asians have ... such as this community centre, or sometimes we go to other women's centres. I feel very relaxed and free, because it's our own people, and it's a carefree environment (AWG1, British Asian, 60s).*

In a post-colonial order characterised by fragmentation, tradition can be a strong pull in holding groups together. Rennie Johnston draws on Woody Allen's view that 'tradition is only an illusion of permanence' (Johnston, 2003: 10), but sometimes an illusion can seem to be enough. If previous sources of collective identity are no longer available, alternative ways need to be discovered (see Beck, 1992 in Field, 2005: 17), and social spaces which confirm otherwise minoritised identities are highly valued:



*I think it's because, umm, a lot of the time sort of you can be in certain environments when you have white friends.*

**Mmm**

*And that's just fine. But there are just odd moments when you are aware of being Asian, or you're with straight friends and there are odd times that you are aware of being gay. But it's just one space where you don't have to think about your label at all. Quite often I don't, I'm not aware of it, but I think you just don't totally relax in an environment just because you are different.*  
(SSG2, 20s, British Asian Indian, lesbian)

Rachel Silvey (2006) argues that gender differences need to be examined with regard to spatialities of power, including the gender dimensions of the socio-spatial production of borders. But as I have argued thus far, gender is not a homogenous category, and borders are constructed around and within gendered post-colonial configurations. This respondent problematises the primacy of 'white' social spaces, pointing instead to the benefits of finding social spaces that enable her to move through and beyond difference. SSG2 wants to move beyond the 'label' whilst AWG1 (above), in finding her own social spaces, prioritises at least two aspects of her identity, her 'Asianness' and her gender. There may also be other aspects of identity, including religion, which make her feel 'relaxed and free' amongst 'our people', yet which seem to set up barriers to communication with others, including language, as another respondent shows:

*We came here and I had very hard time, one year, I live alone, my English was not that good, although I speak English alright, I learned with my children when they go to school. But the English pronunciation of these white people and mine was vast different. I can't explain them what I am going to tell you, or I don't understand when they talk. I understand few words, but then, I thought...oh... I don't know what they are saying, I had very very difficult two years, after, slowly slowly I got my life back when my daughters grow ... and everything.* (AWG3, British Asian, 70s)

For AWG3, a particular type of 'English pronunciation' is associated with 'these white people', demonstrated an association of language with 'race' and hierarchical voices in a post-colonial world. Other respondents, too, express the difficulties that learning to communicate in a different language can bring.

*Yes, I did everything ... after my husband died, I established myself. Nobody helped me. Nobody ever helped me. Nothing, not write a letter, I can't write still an English letter, official letter I can't write it. I can read and I can understand 90%, but 10% I don't understand. So I need a help, I need help, somebody's make me understand. The bills letters comes or some comes you know, then I have to ask somebody, 'Am I understanding alright or it's not alright?', my friend explain me what the letter is saying, and that's what is helping me sometime you know* (AWG4, British Asian, 50s).

Language can be a major obstacle to participation in knowledge societies, a concept I explore below. The emergence of English as the language of globalization leaves little room for other languages (UNESCO, 2005), or for speaking in different voices (Gilligan, (1993). Tett et al (2006) argue that adult literacy and language "are part of social practices ... and are patterned by social institutions and by power relations" (p2). This may be particularly important in the UK currently with the introduction of citizenship tests for those seeking permanent status. Such tests include English language tests to demonstrate the ability to communicate in English. In their own

research on language and identity for asylum seekers, Bellis and Morrice (2003:85) argue that whilst learning English is an important aspect of developing a sense of citizenship and belonging, it is also linked to a sense of identity and self esteem. However, attendance at an English language class by no means guarantees positive identity construction. In part, as AWG3 showed (above), power relations are embedded in the primacy of (particular) languages.

Feminist theorists and others have long questioned the extent to which it is possible for subordinated groups to issue challenges to language, when members of those groups are themselves constructed through the language structures of the dominant group. For example, both 'migrant' and 'woman' are understood in different voices and with differently knowledges. As early as 1973, for instance, Sheila Rowbotham was discussing how women are denied access to language, having instead to construct our identities out of silence, from a consciousness formed in a (white) man's world. In addition, as this respondent shows, consciousness is also formed in a (post)colonial world where moving from silence to speech (hooks, 1989) is not always easy, and migrant women can be literally silenced: 'you can't speak':

*I joined in English classes, you know always I never wasted my time. When I came here, the very first thing I did is I joined English education classes to improve my language. I thought the education is not only for jobs and I believe that education is also used for socializing. Because if you don't know anything, you go anywhere so many friends you have whatever they discuss, but if you can't speak, if you can't take interest in the subject you just sit down like this only. So first of all I thought let me improve my language and everything so that I can talk, mix up about everything. (AWG4, British Asian, 50s).*

For Paulo Freire, often considered a visionary in his work on education and social transformation, literacy is an essential step on the route to becoming a reflective thinker. Freire suggests that we can only achieve a sense of identity through language, and we can only take part in the struggle for transformation if we have an identity (Freire, 2004). Through claiming or reclaiming language, people can critically engage in an analysis of their experience which enables them to transform and create the world. In his examination of language, Freire demonstrates the struggle between oppression and liberation although, as others have shown, literacy itself can be viewed as a colonising process (Bowers and Apffel-Marglin, 2005: 3). In considering literacy and oppressive practices, for example, Freire shows how Creole was viewed as an antagonistic force that threatened the privileged and dominant position of Portuguese (Freire, 1985, p184/6). The colonisers, he says, had to convince people that the only valid language was Portuguese: they stated that Creole does not contain the necessary vocabulary to enable scientific and technical advancement, for instance, and that Portuguese is far superior as an 'educated' and advanced language. (Jackson, 2004:24). The colonisers have the power of naming and of constructing those who 'know' and those who do not.

Throughout his life's work, Freire has viewed education as a political act (Jackson, 2007). Teaching, he believes, can never be divorced from critical analysis of how society works, and teachers must challenge learners to think critically through social, political and historical realities within which they are a presence in the world. He says that:

education makes sense because women and men learn that through learning they can make and remake themselves, because women and men are able to

take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing – of knowing that they know and knowing that they don't (Freire, 2004: 15).

However, the creation of 'knowledge' is neither impartial nor accidental. All knowledge is not equally privileged and what is 'known' and who are the 'knowers' is highly politicised. Some knowledges count, whilst others do not, legitimising and delegitimising beliefs and practices. Education is always a certain theory of knowledge put into practice, and it is therefore always political (Freire, 2004: 71). Different realities, different ways of knowing and experiencing the world, need to be acknowledged and understood. Nevertheless, current political interest in knowledge societies remains in the main unproblematised. Although knowledge societies are about identifying, producing and disseminating information to build and apply knowledge, it has been argued that they require an empowering social vision that encompasses plurality, inclusion, solidarity and participation (UNESCO, 2005). There must be a recognition that 'knowledge' is partial, and embedded in power relations. What can be 'known' and who can be a 'knower' creates both meaning and oppression:

Different knowledges and their possibilities are differently distributed to different social groups. This distribution of different knowledges and possibilities is not based on neutral differences in knowledge, but on a distribution of knowledge which carries unequal value, power and potential (Bernstein, 1996, p8)

When power relations are masked, inequalities between social groups become legitimised. Bernstein (1996: 170) says that a central question to ask is who recognises themselves as of value, and what images are therefore excluded by the dominant image of value? However, the question is not just who recognises themselves as of value, but also how this recognition occurs (or not), and how it is enabled or constrained. Nevertheless, as this respondent shows, different ways of knowing can develop more positively in 'safe' social spaces:

*It's just saying "Oh, y'know I've thought through this and y'know where I'm coming from, it signifies this" and someone will say, "well actually, I can see what you mean, but from where I'm coming from, it signifies that" and I think it's really important to have those discussions 'cause I think that people are um shy of saying things that are opposing or different, and maybe they're worried about offending, so it's nice to have a nice safe, comfortable environment, to say your opinion and listen, and actively listen to someone else as well. And I often change my mind, that's what I like about it. (AWG12, 40s, British/Asian/Pakistani).*

Possibilities for different voices and different spaces are important for the development of both learning and teaching, in speaking and in listening, especially when multiple identities are recognised and embraced. I shall explore this further in the next section by developing a concept of relational capital which can be accumulated, developed and shared.

### Learning through social spaces

As I showed above, lifelong learning is a highly fluid and contestable concept (see e.g. Field 2000; Jackson 2003), with multiple overlapping and differing meanings. I have argued here that especially important for lifelong learning is informal and non-formal learning rather than the more formal and accredited learning which attracts

government funding (Benn et al, 1998; Colley et al, 2003; Field, 2005). As Frank Coffield (2000) has shown:

If all learning were to be represented by an iceberg, then the section above the surface of the water would be sufficient to cover formal learning, but the submerged two-thirds of the structure would be needed to convey the much greater importance of informal learning (Coffield, 2000:1).

Whilst lifelong learning can mean all learning from cradle to grave, including formal, non-formal and informal learning, it is most frequently taken as synonymous with formal post-compulsory learning. Nevertheless, lifelong learning includes learning in educational institutions, in the workplace, in the home, and in religious, voluntary and community organisations. For many women engaged in post-compulsory and informal and lifelong learning, the picture is complex. Less likely than men to have received formal education, especially post-compulsory education (Jackson 2004), social networks can be vital in developing learning opportunities for women. This may be especially true for migrant women moving between countries and cultures (Brine, 1999; Heward and Bunwaree, 1999), who are less likely to have received formal education than are their male counterparts. In the developing countries, an average of one woman in two cannot read and two-thirds of illiterate people in the world are women (UNESCO, 2005).

Naomi Sargent (1997) has shown that the less likely people are to have continued education whilst young, the less likely they are to participate when they are older and for many women, including migrant women, continuing at school or in further education was not considered an option (Jackson, 1998). Although in formal educational institutions there is often little recognition of the past learning experiences, skills and resourcefulness of people of diverse cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds (Dadzie, 1993), one way in which new opportunities can be developed is through informal and non-formal learning opportunities in the different social spaces and for the diverse voices and communities discussed above. London, with its large numbers of migrant communities, is very well placed to be able to offer some of those social spaces. However, learning opportunities differ widely and, as this respondent shows, are sometimes taken up regardless of whether or not there is a perceived need for learning:

*So, one day one of the ladies said hello, hello and she showed me that there is a community centre there on {name} Road and I went there. I come across {name}. She is sewing teacher.*

**Okay**

*She was very good to me and I started sewing. I knew sewing. But for just to pass the time, I joined the class from there got so many other classes. I used to go in {name} and everywhere. I did so many classes. To socialise I do go Saturday and Sunday to my friends in {name} and also in the community centres. [...] the community centres have become my parents like that. All my stay here in {name} has gone in this community centre. Because once a week, twice a week I am there in these community centres (AWG4, British Asian, 50s).*

The respondent shows that whilst she may have appeared to join a community centre to 'learn' a previously held skill (sewing), her primary reason was "to pass the time" and to become part of a community, to obtain some relief from her loneliness. The diverse communities and migrant groups of London give increased opportunities for discovering a sense of group belonging, for affirming diasporic identifications.

Although of secondary interest, AWG4 did move on to learn new skills and develop new interests, through doing 'so many classes'. However, learning was just a part of the importance she attaches to her involvement in the centre and perhaps most importantly she fulfilled her aim to become part of a community, replacing the loss of the generational knowledge ('the community centres have become my parents') left behind in her homeland.

As the quotations from AWG4 (above and below) shows, the respondent has located herself in a discourse of domesticity, including her experience of a daughter learning from her parents. Women like AWG4, often isolated in the 'private' realms of domesticity, may struggle to find new ways. They are more likely to suffer a loss of identity, often feeling rootless due to changing roles in the family as well as to societal perceptions of migrant women (Jackson 2008). In addition, for girls and young women expectations of domesticity have formed and informed their prior experiences, and have often outweighed expectations of schooling and education:

*First of all, I was doing my schooling and everything in that age, other thing that I was looking after the house and everything and I was looking after my sisters and all they were younger to me as I am the eldest (AWG4, British Asian, 50s).*

Nevertheless, informal or lifelong learning is one way in which migrant women can network with others and affirm identities. In considering learning through social spaces, I turn to spaces where what is most important is those aspects of our identities which we have in common with others, where we find common understandings, traditions that are shared and traditions that are still to be made – the social spaces of community.

Community education is one educational arena that has often been attractive to women (Jackson, 2006). It is rooted both in new policy directions linked to social cohesion; older philanthropic concerns with adult education for poor working-class people; and more radical traditions of working class organisations which developed in counterpoint to upholding the status quo (Tett, 2006: 1). Community education is a space where transformation can be acted out, defined through policy and practice, and through ideological positionings. However, as Lyn Tett (2006) explains, although community education responds to concepts of 'community', this is a slippery concept which is difficult to define. However, it can be broadly divided into three elements:

- Place – this is the most common meaning and refers to people living in a particular geographic community such as neighbourhood or village.
- Interest – this refers to people who share the same interest or activity such as community activists or environmentalists or members of the same religious or ethnic group.
- Function – this refers to groups with the same profession, such as teachers, or the same role, such as community representatives, who acquire a common sense of identity despite not having the same physical locus.

(Tett, 2006: 2).

The women in this study fall into all three categories, often in complex ways. Whilst they all share a geographic location - they all currently live in London - the project has demonstrated that London can be viewed as a series of urban villages in which its inhabitants live, work and establish themselves as part of smaller communities. As a major city of migrants (see above), London allows for the possibilities for

multiple communities to develop and flourish. As this respondent shows, 'commonality' with others is as important as finding new ways of being:

*I do have a need in me to meet and to socialise with gay people. There is a commonality there. I mean, actually, [the social group] is that extra special cream on the top of the cake isn't it. That they're not only just gay, but they are also Asian women. And you just think, oh fantastic. Because there is just that commonality and it just makes a huge difference (SS01, 30s, Asian, bisexual).*

For some of the women, centres such as the Asian Women's Centres fulfil a role of bringing together a community of women organised through religious, cultural and/or ethnic traditions:

*Since we live away from our homeland, we enjoy religious celebrations more, and of course the social ones too, because we get to meet each other, discuss things such as problems – consult each other for advice, just sit and chat (AWG1 British Asian, 60s).*

Social spaces can offer a meaningful context for problem posting and problem solving and community knowledge can provide a recognisable starting point for empowerment of minoritised individuals and groups (Johnston, 2003), developing a relational understanding of different ways of knowing as well as replacing knowledge lost through depletion of familial networks:

*You already know that there are firstly these Centres, there is the {name} Women's Centre and an Asian Community Centre. We are involved in a lot of activities here: classes, outings, a Social Club every Monday where we all sit together, have a laugh and a chat, discuss issues and give advice. Some take recipes, some teach knitting, ask for advice about their children, we have all sorts of discussions there which are very helpful because there are people from all age groups – old and young, so the atmosphere varies. There are young people, old women and very old women like me! It's very beneficial communicating with these different age groups. (AWG1 British Asian, 60s).*

Yet communication can sometimes appear to happen in different voices (Gilligan, 1993), voices emanating from multiple traditions, cultural origins and identifications. When migrants arrive in a new homeland, they need to develop, or re-develop, what I am calling here relational capital. This in part refers to the capital that is acquired from familial networks, but also that which acquired from the development of a relational understanding of different realities, of the relationship between things, of different ways of knowing and experiencing sometimes competing worlds.

The concept of capital – whether it is material, social, cultural or so forth – is about its accumulation not just for a stock to exchange, but also to invest. An investment in social capital, for example, can pay off when networks are increased and benefits accrue for the future. Social networks, therefore, become a valuable asset (Field, 2003) which enable people to commit to each other in order to accrue the benefits. Whilst a key benefit of social capital is the development of social cohesion through social networks and relationships of reciprocity and trust, it can also lead to a tightening of the fabric of elite groups, and exclusion of 'others' (Jackson, 2006). That is not to say that those living in marginalised groups or communities cannot also develop the reciprocity, trust and networks demanded for the accumulation of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Nevertheless, privileged groups maintain and use their

networks, connections and relationships with other privileged groups, maintaining the status quo for the group and accruing individual benefits.

Whether for marginalised or elite groups, though, the accumulation of capital is about an individualised notion of benefits. In setting out the case for relational capital, however, I am also arguing for a notion of capital which is about the accumulation of *shared* or collective stocks which may be developed through communities of practice. Communities of practice are formed when people come together who share a repertoire of resources and who engage in a process of collective learning which generates collective ideas, commitments and memories (Wenger, 1998), particularly important for migrants seeking new ways of being without losing diasporic identifications. Learning in communities of practice may be non-formal and intentional, but is mainly informal and unintentional. According to Wenger (undated), for communities of practice to flourish they must contain three elements:

- an identity defined by a shared domain of interest, where members value their collective competences and understandings, even if they are little recognised or valued outside of the group;
- the development of a network of relationships where members interact and learn from each other; and
- the development of shared repertoires of resources, including shared experiences, stories and problem solving.

All three elements exist in the social spaces discussed here, as can be seen, for example, in the Asian Women's Group. However, I am arguing for the importance of a fourth dimension, the development of relational capital, which enables the accumulation of collective stocks of understandings that arise from the relational understandings of and between the different voices, histories and memories discussed here, including those derived from post-colonialism and experiences of diaspora. Relational capital, then, is political, and relational understandings, per se, are about an investment in the development of shared consciousness. For some migrant women, centres such as the social support group play a central role in enabling women to organise around a common sense of identity, regardless of where they live in London, illustrating the formation of social bonds that extend beyond kinship and friendship to other forms of solidarity. Learning through social spaces in which they learn to recognise themselves and others, and to be recognised in return, enables the women to develop clearer knowledge and understandings about their relationships within their competing worlds.

## Conclusions

In this article I have developed a concept of relational capital to expand my discussion of migrant women and lifelong learning in post-colonial London. This refers to the replacement of and addition to knowledge gained in familial networks often lost to migrants, but also the development of a relational understanding of different realities, of different ways of knowing and experiencing sometimes competing worlds. This has included gendered and racialised ways of being which result in appearing to speak in a different voice. In doing so, I have taken a broader explanation of migrancy which includes diasporan experiences and memories, and recognises the complexities of identification for migrant women.

As has been seen from their own self-identifications and categorisations, these include multiple ways of understanding who they are, including affiliations and non-affiliations with nations, ethnicities, religions and sexualities. Cutting across these intersectionalities is the gendered experiences with which the women have lived and continue to live. The women's current experiences are acted out in London, a

complex global and post-colonial city where identity and difference are constructed. These experiences are derived from social, historical, economic, political, ideological and cultural conditions and power relations. For many of the women, such a setting brings with it a loneliness constructed out of difference. One way in which the migrant women in this study resisted (post)colonial constructions of difference is by engaging in informal learning through social spaces they can claim as their own. Whilst not formally considered community education, and largely unfunded, the women have nevertheless developed communities of learning together and have also used their informal learning to develop relational capital.

The research showed that without spaces of affirmation it is not always possible for minoritised groups and individuals to recognise themselves, and they can become rendered invisible. Whilst some interviewees experienced a sense of belonging to neighbourhoods through their multiple identities, for others their prioritised identities led to exclusions and feelings of unbelonging. Whilst it was not always recognised as such, for most of the migrant women in this research, involvement in informal learning through women's social spaces has been involvement in a political act. The article concludes that non-formal and informal lifelong learning developed through women's social spaces in London can develop a greater sense of affirmation and belonging for migrant women.

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<sup>i</sup> Definitions of 'migrant' will be discussed later in this article.

<sup>ii</sup> ESRC RES-148-25-0022 Intersecting identities: Women's spaces of sociality in post-colonial London

<sup>iii</sup> AWG Asian Women's Group  
 BC01: Book club 1  
 BC02: Book club 2  
 BC03: Book club 3  
 CLKG: Central London knitting group  
 KQKG: Klick Queer knitting group  
 NLKG: North London knitting group  
 SSG: Social support group

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